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Beyond Municipalities: Understanding Authority in Low-Income Urban Neighbourhoods in Jordan and Lebanon

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The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 produced a ‘Grand Bargain’ between a range of major international donors and multilateral agencies. It embraces an efficiency and effectiveness agenda to bridge humanitarian financing gaps and advocates for improved coherency and complementarity of humanitarian and development interventions in crises contexts. Integral to the Grand Bargain is a localisation agenda that seeks to make ‘principled humanitarian action as local as possible’ and engage ‘with local and national responders in a spirit of partnership’. Based on research in Jordan and Lebanon, there are key considerations for designing and implementing humanitarian and development interventions in low-income urban areas governed by multiple public authorities.

Who has claims to authority?

When millions of Syrians fleeing civil war sought refuge in Jordan and Lebanon from 2011, initial efforts by the international humanitarian community targeted supporting national governments. However, recognising the vital role of municipalities in providing support and services to those residing in their respective jurisdictions, the last five years have seen a strong shift towards supporting municipalities. There are, however, good grounds to consider that, significantly, municipalities are not the only local actor governing (the relations between host and) displaced populations in urban areas.

In conflict-affected or post-conflict urban settings, multiple actors contest the exercise of public authority, especially in low-income areas. These can include a wide range of governance actors, from ‘big men’, traditional leaders, tribal networks, criminal gangs, labour

brokers, militias, faith-based groups, local committees and others.

This is particularly true for low-income urban areas of Lebanon and Jordan, where the ‘Public Authority and Legitimacy Making’ (PALM) project identified tribal networks (especially in Jordan) and political parties (Lebanon), international UN agencies, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation as amongst groups asserting public authority. These actors, while distinct, commonly straddle the state and the non-state, the public and the private, and the formal and the informal. Like the local state, non-state actors need to legitimise their claims to authority. They do so firstly by drawing on a range of sources of legitimacy, including charismatic leadership, popular consent, and legal status. Secondly, they derive legitimacy from exercising core functions of authority, notably providing welfare (e.g. health, education); security and conflict resolution; controlling territory and monitoring populations.

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Shifting focus onto municipalities

There are key considerations for humanitarian and development agencies aiming to reach out to vulnerable populations in the most impoverished and marginalised urban areas of Lebanon and Jordan.

Donors are increasingly directing support towards municipalities and mayors, seeking to strengthen their capacities to act on growing mandates as local authority. Municipalities in both Jordan and Lebanon include highly urbanised areas as well as low-density populations in rural areas. However, municipal capacities to respond to protracted displacement or acute crises are not necessarily related to population size, or to the complex needs of mixed resident groups.

Decentralisation processes are reshaping the governance of urban environments in Jordan. Municipal authorities have been imbued with new mandates and powers, leading to competition for authority with established actors such as Members of Parliament for local support, and new routes for tribal networks to mould state patronage. Simultaneously, as resources are not significantly increasing, local community-based organisations, whose human resource and organisational capacities have been developed since 2011, are now facing much tougher competition for funding and survival.

In Lebanon, decentralisation is incomplete. Municipal authorities' mandates are not matched with adequate financial and administrative capacities. Moreover, municipalities' room for manoeuvre is often stymied by governorate or central-level decision-making processes and actors, to create space for non-state actors to step in.

Whereas international aid agendas underline the role of municipalities, municipalities cannot be assumed willing and incentivised to be accountable to residents. Non-citizens, including international migrants, stateless people, and refugees have no political representation in these local bodies of state. Furthermore, large proportions of Lebanese residents of urban areas are registered to vote in their native villages, so municipalities neither politically represent nor are accountable to these groups.

This disenfranchisement is enduring too, as terms in office are long (six years), and parties' hold over municipal councils is often lasting. In Jordan, tribes were found to pre-select candidates for municipal elections, in turn preventing non-members from standing for office (e.g. Ma'an city) and disincentivising municipalities from appealing to and being accountable to community members outside of their voter base (i.e. their tribe).

Whereas in Jordan the state has been supporting urban informal settlement upgrading for many

years, Lebanese law forbids municipalities from providing otherwise mandated services to such neighbourhoods. Yet, these chronically under-served neighbourhoods host large numbers of vulnerable refugees, economic migrants and host communities, while precarious living environments and competition for scarce resources may provide fertile ground for conflict.

Many Lebanese municipalities refrain from servicing informal areas for fear of legitimising their existence and of violating the law. Yet, in some areas, governing actors have found ways to improve the condition of informal settlements. After Israeli bombardments in 2006, Hezbollah led the successful 'build back better' campaign in Ghobeiry (Beirut), whereas the municipality of Sour has institutionalised practices that enable Lebanese residents, but not stateless Palestinian inhabitants, to circumvent required building licenses to improve housing infrastructures. It is not clear what kind of politics allow for these local authority innovations to emerge.

As non-state actors step into the vacuum left by municipalities' lack of engagement in marginalised areas in Lebanon to provide security and welfare to resident populations, it is unclear if, and through what mechanisms, accountability can be achieved. This question also applies to humanitarian and development partners, whose accountability may well be tested by Syrian refugees, who are often more aware of services and responsibilities of international actors than local citizens.

Programming in low-income urban settings in Jordan and Lebanon

Humanitarian principles (humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence) potentially enable international responders to work with all at the city or neighbourhood level, including state and non-state, and formal and informal actors. However, humanitarian interventions can be framed as non-neutral and non-impartial in the sense that they can support or deny the legitimacy of local actors seeking to exercise authority.

Municipalities often demand to provide permission to access hard-to-reach communities, and interventions can be viewed as sanctioned by or extending municipal authority. In environments where obtaining health, education, water, and other services is not a matter of rights, but often bestowed by patronage, non-state authorities also seek to broker aid for vulnerable populations to underwrite their claims to legitimate authority.

Non-state actors claiming public authority should not be ignored by international aid agendas focusing on municipalities.

1. These actors can facilitate or deny access to the most vulnerable populations living in the most fragile urban areas. In Lebanon,

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multilateral (and other) agencies as a rule seek to get endorsement for programmes from a municipality. However, non-state actors as well as central government authorities are known to stop interventions, despite municipal endorsement, for security and other reasons. Obtaining municipal endorsement, while important, is not always enough for enabling effective and efficient humanitarian and development programming.

2. A thorough understanding of the role of non-state actors in *de facto* as well as *de jure* urban governance may be important for winning support from the targeted recipients of programming. Populations may distrust absent municipal authorities, while non-state actors that provide important security, welfare, and conflict resolution services may be seen to carry significant legitimacy.

Although an emphasis on municipalities suggests a certain homogeneity, donors' abilities to engage varies substantially across and even within municipalities. In Jordan, tribal networks significantly penetrate the state, where a social contract of the state providing ghost jobs assures the enduring support for the state from key tribes. Mayors of the Islamic Action Front affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood use hostile language towards Western donors, yet are found to be willing to implement programmes in, for example, the city of Zarqa.

In Jordan, donors deem tribal authorities to be insufficiently inclusive of women, refugees and other vulnerable populations; aid is directed towards producing new civil society organisations, whose sustainability and local legitimacy yet remain unproven. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is elected into state offices (from municipal council to parliament) and governs large swaths of impoverished urban areas, yet it is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by several Western countries including the US, UK, Canada and the Netherlands. The party itself also significantly shapes both the geographical and substantive terrain of possibilities for intervening by international humanitarian and development agencies, and the ability of donors to provide support, by scrutinising and (dis)allowing prospective programmes.

High-value aid programmes can influence local governance actors. If there are actors or areas that are not receiving attention from government donors, private donors can potentially step in. Bringing their own monies allows for bargaining with donors to enable flexibility and a more equitable distribution of aid to areas and people based on needs. Accordingly, one INGO reported that negotiation with public authorities allowed it to operate in donor-identified as well as in own priority identified neighbourhoods.

Such bargaining space is dependent on the size and value of the programme, suggesting also that collaborative efforts between private and government donors can be effective in accessing otherwise hard-to-reach areas. However, care is needed to avoid passing responsibility for who deals with non-state public authorities to smaller actors with less resources to manage efforts within the frameworks and expectations of the international community.

Humanitarian and development activities critical to achieving human protection objectives may be in tension with the attainment of geopolitical goals of stabilisation and state-building, where the former (intentionally or otherwise) underwrite the legitimacy of local non-state actors. However, the reverse may be true too, where the absence of programming by municipal authorities and the international community allows non-state actor service providers to be the only authority in the area.

In the case of Hezbollah, some donors proscribe both military and political wings of Hezbollah, others only proscribe the former, allowing space to engage in humanitarian dialogue and programming. Implementing partners face the dilemma of navigating diverse donor strictures on the one hand, and respecting the democratically elected office of mayors, municipal councillors, parliamentarians, and appointed offices of cabinet ministers on the other. Ignoring some political parties governing specific urban areas, while supporting others, may make it impossible to develop municipal capacities while also unjustifiably punish people living in these areas, whether they are supportive of the party in control, or not. The balance of aid distribution may also affect a fragile balance of power between political parties and thus undermine efforts to maintain stability. Proscription policies thus may be at risk of compromising humanitarian values by privileging geopolitical interests of donor countries.

Five considerations for humanitarian and development actors

Responders should recognise that local state and non-state authorities draw on a range of claims to legitimacy, by providing welfare, security and conflict resolution, controlling territory and monitoring populations. Humanitarian actions, whether conducted or withheld, intervene in local struggles for power and authority, as a source of legitimacy.

1. **It is important for international humanitarian or development actors to establish strong context analysis for effective programme design.** This needs to be done at local area or neighbourhood level and include stakeholder

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mapping, analysis, and simultaneous equal engagement with state and non-state actors to build productive relationships ahead of programmatic interventions.

Analysis should not overstate the division between formal and informal actors. In many cases they are intricately related, with non-state actors aiming to influence government action, and governments seeking to shape the behaviours of the former. The ability to engage with non-state public authorities in low-income urban areas, and on what terms, is shaped by the latter's willingness to engage, as well as by donor and organisational policies and practices.

2. **Significant effort is needed on communicating with communities to build meaningful consensus** on programme objectives before a programme starts. This is time-consuming and resource-intensive yet critical, as the order in which stakeholders are engaged is important and can close doors later if one makes a misstep early on.
3. **Greater dialogue between implementing partners and donors is needed to understand how to sensitively deal with competing multiple authorities** in urban low-income areas, and to effectively learn from experience. Whereas political intelligence supports donor international aid efforts, including through embassies, organisations in the humanitarian–development nexus do not necessarily benefit from such insight. Donors could provide more practical guidance on how to operate with non-state public authorities that are deemed exclusionary (of women, tribes, sectarian groups, etc).

Aid actors may attempt to directly or indirectly influence the norms underlying legitimacy-making or disengage altogether. Similarly, where proscription policies apply, they can give greater clarity on red lines that are not to be crossed, as implementers are operating within an increasingly risk-averse funding environment. Moreover, aid agencies should be encouraged to give feedback to donors' operational realities in trying to reach complex, high-need areas.

4. **Increased emphasis on the role of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator** is needed to do more to negotiate access with local public authorities to allow implementation of agencies within the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) or other response frameworks, and to ensure that 'hard-to-reach areas' are still receiving a wide array of support. Actively linking humanitarian to development interventions, as envisaged in the Grand Bargain, in theory provides for longer-term programmes that allow for including a wider range of partners and building up necessary trust with non-state public authorities. Yet, whereas this calls for multi-year funding, humanitarian interventions in particular tend to have short funding and programming cycles.
5. **Due to the extremely limited existing literature on the subject, there is an acute need for substantial primary data collection** to support deeper knowledge and assessment tools for assessing the legitimacy effects of humanitarian and development interventions for state (including municipal) and non-state actors governing low-income urban informal settings.

Further reading

Australian Aid *et al.* (2016) '[The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need](#)', Istanbul, 23 May 2016



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